

Testimony for Public Hearing
House Committee on Families, Children, and Seniors
September 11, 2013

Rev. Nicolette L. Siragusa
1274 Burlington Dr.
Grand Ledge, MI 48837

Re: House Bills 4927 & 4928

Good morning, my name is Rev. Nicolette Siragusa, and I urge you to to oppose House Bills 4927 and 4928.

As a local church pastor, part of my work is to help people live out the values they claim to profess. As our elected officials, you are entrusted to make decisions on behalf of the people you serve. I am here to remind you that these decisions should reflect our shared values, values like educating our children, protecting vulnerable populations, and encouraging stable family systems.

I am thankful for foster care agencies and foster families who have the daunting task of caring for 14,000 of our state's most vulnerable children. When children are removed from their families by the state because of abuse or neglect, the state has the responsibility to make sure that they are placed with foster or adoptive families who best fit their needs. The bills before you, however, put the religious beliefs of placement agencies above the best interest of the child they have been entrusted to protect.

When children become available for adoption, it is in their best interest to be placed in a permanent home as quickly as possible. According to the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, in 2011, Michigan had over 4,200 children in foster care waiting to be adopted, ranking

Michigan fifth in the nation for the number of children who were eligible for adoptions but remained in foster care.

Under these proposed bills, even fit parents, with good and loving homes, may be rejected by agencies based on any arbitrary criteria that the agency calls a 'sincerely held' belief. Capable and willing families that are eager to love and support our state's most vulnerable children should be encouraged and supported. There are already rigorous background checks, home visits, and other criteria that potential parents must meet - criteria agreed to and adhered by agencies seeking to be agents of the state.

As a Christian minister, I am thankful for religious liberty, and I am thankful for the wide variety of religious groups that include social welfare as a part of their activities. However, no public funds should go to a supposed child welfare agency that disregards the welfare of a child, disregards 'the best interests of the adoptee,' in favor of its own discriminatory doctrine.

I'm not sure why we are even discussing a bill which itself acknowledges that denying a prospective adoptive home based on an agency's religious or moral convictions does not imply "that the proposed adoption is not in the best interests of the adoptee."

Our state already has a poor record of transitioning children from foster care to adoptive homes in a timely manner. The class action lawsuit *Dwayne B. vs. Granholm* listed a series of complaints against our foster care system, including excessively long stays in state custody, an inadequate number of foster homes, and poor transitioning of children out of foster care and into permanent homes. The case was settled in 2008 with specific remedies in place.

Our state's progress in complying with the settlement agreement continues to be monitored, and our efforts should be focused on cultivating stable environments in which children can grow and thrive. Instead, valuable time is being spent debating a bill designed to protect agencies that choose to discriminate.

Bills 4927 and 4928 do not remedy the issues of the past, nor do they further the interests of children in state care today. In fact, these bills acknowledge that, if passed, they empower agencies to make decisions that are not in the best interest of the children in their care.

It is unconscionable to deny children available, stable, permanent, loving homes. It is reprehensible to consider allowing agencies to turn away fit parents for reasons having nothing to do with their ability to care for children, especially when those same agencies are hired by the state specifically to insure the welfare and well-being of children.

Thus, for the sake of our state's most vulnerable children, I urge you to oppose House Bills 4927 and 4928.